

Don't Fear Militias, Fear Their Fringes

Laird Wilcox – *Newsday*, April 27, 1995

Most members are law-abiding, but an extremist minority may react violently to what it sees as renewed McCarthyism.

Not since the Red Scare of the 1920s has a political minority been under as much hostile scrutiny as the right-wing militia movement is today. The Oklahoma City bombing – the worst incident of domestic terrorism in American history – quickly focused on a man with ephemeral links to a militia group in Michigan. This link, however, consists largely of the fact that he was denied membership in the group, not that he was an active member acting under its direction. The bombing, in fact, appears to be the action of a psychopathic ex-soldier and a few confederates acting on their own.

It's difficult to imagine what the average militia member felt as events unfolded last week, but it must have been excruciatingly uncomfortable for him. Sure, militia members spout conspiratorial rhetoric and uniform hostility toward a federal government they feel is getting out of hand. But I think it's safe to say virtually none of them condoned the bombing and all were horrified to find their movement linked with it.

These are people, after all, with the same response to cold-blooded murder as you or I. But in their case, the horror evolved into a conspiracy theory that the government or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms was responsible for the bombing in order to pin it on the militias and bring them down.

Still, the question remains: Are militias dangerous? The answer is, it depends; if they weren't before, they may very well be now. What may up the ante is the incredible law enforcement attention the movement is getting. I think the militias will experience a precipitous decline in membership over the next few months, because of the growing social pressures on identified militia people and their families. Already they are being called "baby killers" and treated like pariahs in some communities.

This leaves only the die-hards as militia members, and they have been, to borrow a '60s term, "radicalized." So it is individuals, not groups, we have to fear, and the hot button is the pressure law enforcement exerts.

Who constitutes militias? We read of neo-Nazi skinhead and Ku Klux Klan influence, but my investigation shows little of that. In fact, most militias refuse membership to people like Timothy McVeigh, who talk racism or terrorism. What militias are rife with are guns and conspiracy theories – which most believers have difficulty explaining. Are militias enormous, as some claims suggest? Not at all. Militia leaders routinely lie about support and membership and absurd figures as high as two million are claimed. But no responsible source has suggested a total of more than 10,000 nationwide, and I think it's half that. What I see is 2,000 to 3,000 hard-core activists, meaning people who regularly come to meetings, pay dues, take part in maneuvers

and put out the newsletter. Another 3,000 to 4,000 maintain some tie but are not deeply involved. So roughly one American in 40,000 is a member.

Are militias fascist? I doubt it simply because of the strong anarchist thread that runs through the movement. Like all radical right-wingers, militia members are a contentious, highly individualistic and idiosyncratic lot. They don't get along well with one another and many tiny militias are splinters from others. One member said that leading the militia was like trying to herd cats.

The relative dangerousness of a group or movement further may be judged from the social groupings from which it draws its membership. Urban gangs, for example, are drawn from young unattached males with no jobs, property or prospects. This is the crime- and violence-prone segment of society. The mainstream militias, in contrast, are drawn from working and lower-middle class males aged 30 to 50, with wives, jobs, homes and kids in school. This is not a crime-producing segment of society. I think a study of militia members would show a crime rate equal to or even less than that of the country as a whole.

The result is that when members get into trouble with the law, it's usually for some "protest" crime, like refusing to get dog tags or not paying taxes on their trucks. Because of their obsession with gun rights, militia members have been charged with various weapons-possession offenses. But rarely are they charged with serious crimes of violence.

This leaves those die-hard individuals. What direction they go in next, in a sense, depends on the rest of us. Often, the worst damage terrorists or extremists inflict on our society is the threat society imposes upon itself out of fear and overreaction.

Right now, we're at a dangerous crossroads: The media linkage of the Oklahoma bombing with right-wing politics has the makings of a witch hunt on a scale we haven't seen since Moe McCarthy. Even our president has tried to link conservative talk show hosts to the bombing. This means that anybody with an American flag on the lawn may soon be suspect, and this kind of paranoia is not something to inflict on the already afflicted.

Also, the deleterious effects on civil liberties of proposed anti-terrorism legislation in Washington are being protested by a small number of honest civil libertarians. Increased use of wiretaps, break-ins, infiltration and surveillance are not encouraging signs and will play into the worst fears of conspiracy theorists, left or right. I hope we take some time to think this through before we start making mistakes, but so far I'm not encouraged.

"Don't Fear Militias, Fear Their Fringes" was a finalist for the Free Press Association's prestigious Mencken Award for Best Editorial of 1995.

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